

A9 THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1999 / F

Escape to Paradise on a Weekly Basis? Not at Any Price

■ Vacations: In a slap at tourists, Florida Keys passes regulation banning renting a home for fewer than 28 days. Locals worry about economy suffering.

From The Baltimore Sun

CUDJOE KEY, Fla.—The view is pristine. You can, however, rent it for a while.

For \$1,000 a week, Yvonne Richardson's home here has delighted vacationers seeking their own temporary slice of paradise.

It's a simple, two-bedroom place, nothing remarkable, until you see the backyard, the Atlantic Ocean.

But now, thanks to a new law that has pitted neighbor against neighbor in the normally laid-back Florida Keys, even that fleeting experience of island living is beyond the reach of many tourists.

The law is intended to curb the number of tourists encroaching on the Keys' vanishing tranquility.

It bans the rental of homes in most residential neighborhoods for fewer than 28 days, making that singular mode of relaxation, the beach house, impossible for anyone with less than a month of vacation time.

The ban has outraged the owners and managers of the estimated 8,000 rental homes in the Keys, as well as stores, restaurants and service personnel who depend on a stream of visitors for their livelihood, if not their mortgages.

Piece of Paradise May Be Lost

"I don't know if I'll be able to keep it if we can't rent it out when we're not here," Richardson said sadly of the house that she and her husband use as a getaway from their home in Ohio several times a year, renting it out the rest of the time.

"We love our little home, but now we may have to put it up for sale."

The ordinance affects unincorporated Monroe County, which encompasses the 120-mile chain of islands that arcs out from the mainland and is enviable situated between the sparkling blue Atlantic on one side and the emerald-tinted Gulf of Mexico on the other.

The controversy over the law, though, is particularly contentious here in the Lower Keys, roughly the southern-most third of the islands from the mainland.

These are the quiet Keys—until, that is, you reach the literal end of the road, the famous Key West.

But except for the town usually dubbed Margaritaville, the Lower Keys are where tourists and permanent residents come for peace rather than action, days of fishing rather than nights of bar hopping.

Unlike the towns to the north of them, the Lower Keys have just a few small hotels and bed-and-breakfasts, making rental homes a popular option for vacationers.

Rental agents say the law will most affect families, often from

other parts of Florida, who come down with their boats, rent a house with a dock and stay for a week or two.

"I've never heard of a resort area discouraging people from coming for a vacation," said Barbara Strong, a transplanted New Yorker who lives on Big Pine Key. "They just put up a new welcome center on Big Pine. Who are they welcoming? Where will they stay?"

"President Carter stayed here on Summerland Key for two weeks a couple of years ago," said Bernice Matthews, a rental property manager. "I guess he can't come back now."

The law, which took effect about 45 days ago, after several years of heated debate, is the latest outburst in the growing tensions between tourists and year-rounders in the Keys, as well as other resort areas.

In California, for example, Carmel enacted a ban on rentals of less than a month's duration about six years ago, said Jeff Lettner, whose family owns a property management company there, and other

towns on the Northern California coast quickly followed suit.

"It became a domino effect," Britton said. "It's really unfair. Carmel was built as a resort area. People moved here knowing that. People move here, then they try to shut the rest of the world out."

Everyone's Just Looking Out for No. 1

The irony, of course, is that in Carmel, as well as the Florida Keys, many residents who support limiting rentals were renters once, vacationers who ultimately decided to stay.

"We call it 'pull up the ladder syndrome,'" Christine Sharpe said. "I'm here, I get mine, I don't care about you."

Sharpe and her parents run Sea Breeze Outfitters, a store and charter boat business on Big Pine Key, and already they're noticing a decline in customers.

But those who support the rental ban say it's time to tighten the lax

laws that allowed desirable places such as the Keys to become over-run and overpopulated.

"We're at the 11th hour. It may already be too little too late," said Keith Douglas, a former Monroe County commissioner who visited for the rental limit. "But at what point are we jeopardizing our ability to protect the environment and the quality of life here?"

Tourists, supporters of the law say, encroach on the Keys' fragile environment, a limited water supply and the vanishing quietude that brought many of them here.

"You would get multitudes of strangers in your neighborhood. The Realtors would let four, five families into a single home. Nobody had any peace and quiet," said Gene Patton, a retiree on Cudjoe

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